

Major Pendallas.

A CHRISTMAS STORY.

BY FRANK R. STOCKTON.



ON December 24, 1880, I was standing in a little American country railway station, in a state of perplexity. Near me, sitting in a chair by the stove, was a young lady, also in a state of perplexity. Facing us both stood the station-master, who had been in a state of perplexity, but was getting out of it.

way to join a Christmas party at the house of her uncle, Mr. Dolliver, some seven miles from the station, and I, invited to the same house, had been delighted to meet her on the train. We were good friends, and had studied art together in Paris. When we left the city in a morning train, a little snow was beginning to fall, and as we journeyed northward we found the snow-

fall heavier and heavier, and we had arrived at this little village of Boynton at three o'clock in the afternoon, an hour behind time.

From Boynton to the Dolliver house we were to go by a stage coach, but the stage driver had left more than an hour previously, hurrying away before his ordinary time of starting, for fear the road would be blocked up before he could get to his home, a good twelve miles away, and assuring himself that there would be no passengers for him on such a day.

It was reasonable enough that we should be perplexed, for we could not see, nor at first could the station-master see, how we were to get to our journey's end that day. If we would wait until next day, he told

us, the stage driver would be back in a sleigh. He said he would be sure to come—for Christmas packages, if not for passengers. But we could

not wait until next day. It would be better to return to the city in the next down train, if, happily, one should come. We could not hope that the Dollivers would send for us, for if they saw the stage pass without stopping, they would be sure



"I'LL SEE WHAT I CAN DO FOR YOU."

"Just you wait here ten minutes," he said, "and I'll see what I can do for you," and putting on a fur cap and an ulster, he went out of doors.

The state of the case was this: Miss Welden, the lady by the stove, was on her

we had not come by the train. The station-master was a good man, and did his best to get us out of our trouble. He had doubts about another train coming down that day—it was a branch road with one track—and he thought it would be a great pity if the Dollivers should be deprived of the company of two of their Christmas guests; a lot of them had come up the day before. Nobody in the village made a business of hiring out vehicles or carrying passengers, but an idea had struck the station-master, and he had gone out to see what he could do with it.

In about a quarter of an hour he returned.

"Well, sir," he said, "there is just one thing you can do. There isn't anybody in this village who will go to Dollivers' to-day, for there is no chance of getting back to-night, but the man who keeps the store here, Mr. Peter Chase, has got a horse and sleigh, and if you choose to hire that of him, and do your own driving, I think you can get it, if you are willing to pay him something extra, for he'll have to send a man over to-morrow with the stage driver to bring it back; and besides, in rough times like these, people always charge something extra."

I put the matter before Miss Welden, and she did not hesitate to say that, rather than take the risk of being obliged to remain in the village, where there were no accommodations for strangers, she would

take the risk of letting me drive her to the Dollivers'.

"It is only seven miles," she said, "and if the horse is good enough, I don't see what there is to happen."

I tramped through the snow to Peter Chase's store, and quickly arranged with him for the hire of his horse and sleigh.

"Five dollars may seem a good deal, sir," he said, "for a trip like that, but this is a pretty deep snow, and we all ought to remember that Christmas comes but once a year. I'll have the sleigh round at the station in ten minutes."

In half an hour a little sleigh, drawn by a big brown horse, came up to the back door of the station.

"I would have been here sooner," said Mr. Chase, "but it was a good while before I could find the bells, and I knowed you wouldn't want to take a Christmas sleigh-ride without bells."

I did not complain of the delay, although I had been getting dreadfully impatient. The station-master had had a telegram from up the line, stating that a down train with a snow-plough was on its way, and I was very much afraid that Miss Welden would conclude to wait, and take this train back to the city, so without loss of time we bundled in. The Christmas-minded Mr. Chase had brought two heavy fur robes; our valises were packed in behind, the sleigh being of the box variety, and we were ready.



"A JOLLY SLEIGH-RIDE."

"There is no mistaking the way," said Mr. Chase. "You go straight ahead until you come to the house."

"Which I know perfectly well," added Miss Welden, and away we jingled.

The snow was still falling, but we did not mind that, and now that we had started off, I was glad that Mr. Chase had waited to find the bells. Their merry jingle suited my spirits well. A jolly sleigh-ride with Clara Welden was more enjoyment than I had counted on for this Christmas.

A young man and a young woman, both of lively dispositions, good friends, fellow-workers, and nothing more, are much more likely to have a merry time in a case like this, than if they were a pair of lovers, or even if one of them were a lover. True love implies a certain seriousness, and is not infrequently conducive to demureness.

The snow was deep on the road, and sometimes drifted, but the sleigh went through it well enough. The horse, however, probably not a very good traveller on the best of roads, made but slow progress. But although he was an animal of deliberate action, possessing, as Miss Welden thought, an æsthetic turn of mind, which made him object to destroy the virgin smoothness of the snow with his great hoofs, he was strong, and that was the main point. With reason to believe that we should safely reach our journey's end, it did not trouble me that we were making that journey slowly, and my companion appeared to be of my way of thinking. The beauty of the snow-decorated forests, fields, and hills was enough to make our artists' hearts satisfied, even if the horse should decline to do more than walk.

It began to grow dark, and we had not reached the hospitable mansion to which we were bound, but there was a beautiful weirdness in the snow scenes softened by the dusky light, and our hearts and the bells were still merry. But as it grew darker and darker, we both began to wish that we stood in the light and warmth of the Dolliver house. I whipped the horse, who made a few bounds through

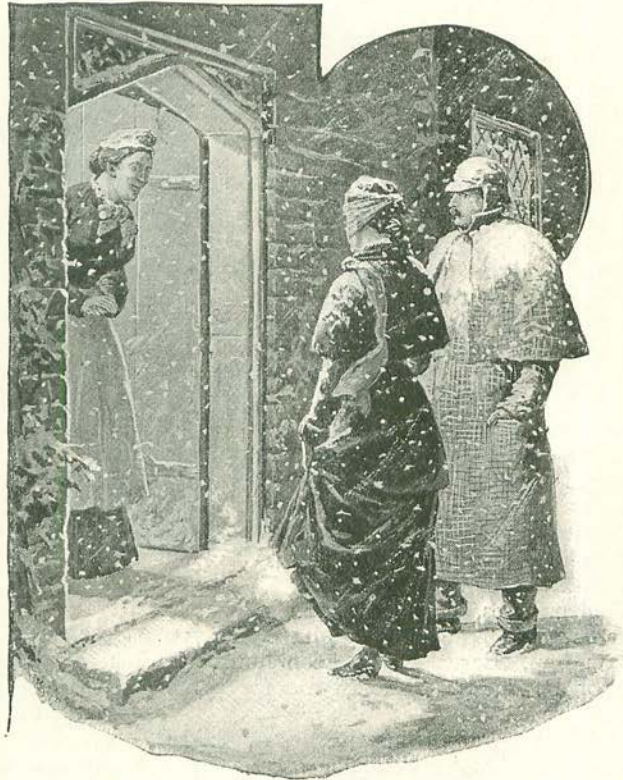
the snow and then relapsed into his former trot. It was of no use to try to hurry him.

Several times Miss Welden had assured me that she was not in the least anxious, and that she was sure we should now reach the house in a very short time; I think she was about to say something of the kind again, when suddenly she exclaimed, in a voice that had a ring of hearty cheerfulness in it, very different from her previous expressions of thoughtful encouragement—

"Here it is. Didn't I tell you? We are at the very gate."

Sure enough, there was the gate with a lamp on one of the posts, and there in the midst of its whitened grounds was the house, its windows lighted, and a lamp on the piazza.

When I pulled up to the door I attempted to bound from the sleigh, but my bound was a poor one, for I found my legs were somewhat stiffened by the cold. As I



'AN ELDERLY WOMAN STOOD IN THE PORTAL.'

helped Miss Welden to alight, I could perceive she was not nearly so active as I had generally known her. The door opened before we had time to reach it, and an

elderly woman, with a Christmassy look about her, which was absolutely warming, stood in the broad portal.

We stopped on the piazza before entering, stamping and shaking ourselves, for we were two figures of snow.

"Our valises are in the back of the sleigh," I said, and to my surprise my teeth chattered a little as I spoke. "I think the horse will stand until someone takes him."

We then went in. Suddenly Miss Welden stopped, and looked from right to left, and turning to the good woman, she exclaimed:

"This is not Mr. Dolliver's house?"

"Of course not," said the other, "did you think it was? Major Pendallas lives here."

Miss Welden and I looked at each other in dismay.

"We have made a mistake," I said. "How much further on is it to the Dolliver place?"

"It isn't farther on at all," the woman replied, "it is not on this road at all."

"It is too bad," I said, "they told us at Boynton it was a straight road, and we could not miss it."

"So it is, but three miles below here there is a fork that anybody might mistake, especially at night, with the roads unbroken. But come in and get warm, you must be half frozen. I'll have a man throw a blanket over the horse;" and with this she showed us into a large room with a wood-fire blazing on the hearth. She pushed two chairs before the fire.

"Sit down," she said, "and get a little warm. If I am not mistaken this is Miss Clara Welden. Yes, I thought so. It's been a long time since I have seen you. I am Mrs. Bardsley. I keep house for Major Pendallas. Excuse me for a moment."

"What a grand thing this fire is," said I, "and who is Major Pendallas?"

"I never saw him in my life," said Miss Welden, following my example, and drawing up closer to the fire, "but I have often heard of him. He used to be in the army, I think, and now he has a stock farm, and has all sorts of fine horses and cows. I

wonder if he would be willing to send over to my uncle's? I can't bear to think of starting out again in that sleigh, and with that horse."

I was glad she did not include the driver in her objections, and said I hoped that the Major would be able to do something for us. But at the time I did not give much thought to the subject, for my whole soul was occupied in revelling in the genial heat. I had had no idea that I was so cold.

In about five minutes the door opened, and a tall, broad-shouldered man, wearing a heavy pea-jacket, and an unmistakable air of being the master of the house, entered the room. He was middle-aged, had side whiskers, and bright blue eyes. We both



"HE GREETED MISS WELDEN."

rose, and with outstretched hand he greeted Miss Welden.

"Delighted to see you," he said, in a hearty tone. "Mrs. Bardsley tells me you have lost your way, but that doesn't matter, I'll make that all right."

Then he turned towards me, and Miss Welden introduced me.

"Ashmead?" he repeated, as he grasped me by the hand.

"Yes," I replied, "Henry G. Ashmead." As I spoke he gave me a quick look, and

seemed about to say something in reference to my name, but he checked himself, and urged us to sit down again.

"What you must do now is to get warm—get warm," he said, and he put two great logs on the fire.

With a few quick questions, and without sitting down, he made himself acquainted with the situation. For a moment he gazed down upon us, and then he said, "The first thing to do, now that you are a little thawed, is to get off your coats and wraps."

"That is hardly worth while," I replied, "for as soon as we are well warmed, we must get on, in some way or other, to the Dolliver house."

"Sir," said Major Pendallas, "there is no Dolliver house for you to-night. Here you

blowing now as well as snowing, and I am not going to let a young lady go out into a storm like this, especially when she has had already as much as she is able to stand of that sort of thing. Your bags will be brought in, and your horse put in the stable. Mrs. Bardsley will take charge of Miss Welden. I'll attend to you, sir, and supper will be ready in half an hour," and without waiting for an answer he left the room.

We looked at each other and laughed.

"That is just what I hoped he would do," said Miss Welden. "I have had all the sleighing I want for this day."

"Good," I cried, throwing off my overcoat; "I feared I might have to persuade you."

"That is really absurd," she said; "as if



"WE THREE SAT DOWN TO A BIG ROUND SUPPER TABLE."

are, and here you stay. It is three miles back to the main road, and then you would have two miles more to go, and before you reached the Dolliver house there is a long hollow, and at this present moment the snow is probably drifted five feet. If you had taken the right road you most likely would have been in that snow-drift now. I have sleighs and teams enough, and no doubt I could pull you through, but it is

the storm and Major Pendallas were not quite enough."

In five minutes Miss Welden had been carried off by the beaming Mrs. Bardsley, while Major Pendallas conducted me to a bedroom on the ground floor, in which I found a crackling wood fire. The house was a large one, and seemed to be lighted from top to bottom.

We three sat down to a big round sup-

per table, and, as might have been expected, the meal was bountiful, hot, and most grateful and cheery to the two storm-beaten travellers, who had eaten nothing since breakfast except an unattractive luncheon on the train.

Our host did most of the talking, and we were well content to let him do it.

"You cannot imagine," he burst out, as soon as we were seated, "how glad I am to have you two people here. I expected to spend this Christmas Eve absolutely alone, and I should have felt that, for I never did anything of the kind before, and, from a boy, I have thought more of Christmas Eve than of Christmas Day. There is less of a strain in it. On Christmas Day you feel as if you ought to be awfully jolly, because if you don't, you won't have another chance for a year. On Christmas Eve one can be jolly without thinking of it. If there are any shortcomings they can be made up next day. Last year my niece was with me, and we had plenty of company; but now she's married and cleared out, utterly. Gone to Europe with her husband, and intends to stay there. But the storm has been good to me. Let me give you a piece of this chicken, sir, and some butter. This is Christmas butter, especially made from the cream of two cows, both granddaughters of the great Cavalier George."

The Major's anticipation of a truly jolly Christmas Eve was interfered with by Miss Welden, who declared, shortly after nine o'clock, that she was so fatigued by her day's experiences that she would be obliged to bid us good-night. When she had gone, the Major and I each lighted a cigar, and drew up before the big fire in the parlour.

"I can't help being disappointed," said he, "for I intended to get up a lot of games, and have Mrs. Bardsley and her daughter in. They are very respectable people, and at Christmas time we always have them in at the games. But bed is the best place for Miss Welden, after what she has pulled through this day. And I am so rejoiced to have you both in the house that I shan't grumble. It doesn't matter in the least that when the sun set to-day I had never seen either of you, nor you me. I know who you are, and you know who I am—at least, Miss Welden knows, and that's enough."

"But you don't know me," I said.

"Indeed I do," he exclaimed, slapping one of his spread-out knees, and leaning

toward me. "I know you in the best kind of a way. I have one of your pictures. Now, don't go and say you are not the artist, Henry G. Ashmead."

"I am that man," I replied.

"I didn't doubt it," said the Major, leaning back in his chair, "you look like it. I am a bachelor, sir, and it takes a good deal to keep that sort of a man content and easy in his mind. Pictures and books help a lot in that way, and I make it a point every year to buy a good picture. I got one of yours last fall, and I am very fond of looking at it. Come with me, and I'll show it to you."

The Major then preceded me to a medium-sized room in the front of the house, which he called his reading-room.

"It isn't a study," said he, "for I never study; and it isn't a library, for it hasn't books enough for that; but it is as good a room to read in as I know. A fine light, and always cool in summer. There is the picture," and he held up a lamp before one of my large landscapes.

"I thought Burnet owned that," I exclaimed.

"Yes, he did, but he's been hard up lately, and had to sell off part of his collection. I snapped up that as soon as I saw it. There are things in that picture that you seldom see in paintings. That's timothy grass in that meadow, and a cut about the end of June would make hay worth about twenty dollars a ton. It's ready to cut now," said he, "and from the looks of the leaves on the trees, and the size of those mullein plants, I should say it was in June that you took it."

"I made my studies in June," I replied.

"Good," he cried, "I knew it. There's no nonsense about that meadow, such as you would see in most pictures. No bushes and straggling briars, or patches of red clover, and orchard grass. I am a straightforward and practical man, and I like a straightforward and practical picture. Of course, you couldn't help the daisies, and no more can I in my own meadows. Now, then," said he, when we were again before the fire, "you can see for yourself how I know you, and I can tell you that it delights me to have in my house the man who painted that picture. After awhile I'll brew a bowl of Regent's punch. But it isn't late enough for that. We'll have a bachelor night of it. By next Christmas, I suppose, the young lady will put a veto on bachelor nights."

"Veto," said I, "what do you mean?"

"You will surely be married by next Christmas," he replied.

"Married!" I exclaimed, with a laugh. "We have never thought of being married."

The Major took his cigar from his mouth, put his hands upon his knees, leaned forward, and looked at me.

"Do you mean to say, sir, that you and Miss Welden are not engaged to be married?"

mad it has always been better for me in the end. Now would you mind telling me if that young woman is engaged to somebody else, or if you are? Don't get angry. If anybody is angry, I ought to be."

I was not in the least offended. There was an impetuous but kindly earnestness about the man which impressed me very agreeably. There are some people whose liberties are pleasant rather than otherwise. The Major was one of those people.

"I am not engaged," I said with a smile, "and I have no reason to believe that she is."

Major Pendallas thrust his hands into his trouser pockets, strolled to the other end of the large room, and, then turning, came back and sat down.

"I believe," said he, "that the man who lives alone does more thinking to the minute than other people. When she was pouring out the coffee to-night, and you were handing your cup to her, and both of you were laughing about

the sugar, I stopped eating and I said to myself, 'That is as perfect a match as I ever saw.' And in regard to human beings it is very seldom that I think that. And now you turn around and tell me that you and she go single."

I could not help laughing at the serious way in which he discussed the subject.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," said I, "but Miss Welden and I are not marrying people. For myself, I cannot afford matrimony."

"That's what I once thought," he said, "and for thirty-five years I have regretted that I was foolish enough to think so."

It was plain that my host was a man of nervous temperament. He could not sit



"THE MAJOR LEANED FORWARD AND LOOKED AT ME."

"Not at all," said I, "we have known each other a long time, but we are friends and nothing more."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" cried Major Pendallas, throwing away his cigar and rising abruptly from his chair. Then, standing with his back to the fire, he looked down upon me.

"Now I am disappointed. I surely thought you two were a team, and a fine one. I had made up my mind to it, and now I am set back. I feel as if I were driving a big Percheron and a polo pony. I'm a practical, common-sense man, and I don't mind asking practical, common-sense questions. I have done that all my life, and though I have made a good many people

still while considering this subject, evidently of deep interest to him. He now rose, folded his arms, and looked at me steadily for fully a minute. As he gazed at me, his eyes seemed to grow brighter and larger. "It was my intention to make a business proposition to you, founded on what you and Miss Welden said about this part of the country, and how much you liked it. I considered it one of the happiest thoughts I had ever had."

"What was it?" I asked, a good deal amused, but careful not to show it. "I shall be glad to hear it, whether I can accept it or not."

"All right," said the Major, seating himself with decision, "you shall have it. I will make the proposition in the commonsense, straightforward manner in which I intended to make it. For over ten months I have been kicking and fuming at being obliged to live here in this lonely house. To-night I said to myself over and over again, 'What would I give if these two would eat all their meals with me; would come here and live in this house?' And then I said, 'Why shouldn't they? He's a landscape painter, and they would want to live somewhere in the country, and are not likely to find any place more beautiful than this. Now, perhaps, that's just what they want, and what they are looking for, and the best thing you can do is to make them the offer without loss of time.' While I was thinking of this, my spirits went up to about a hundred in the shade, but when you told me you were not an engaged couple, down they went, I don't know how far."

"What did you intend to offer?" I asked.

"Offer!" he said, "everything. I intended to put at your disposal, as soon after you married as you pleased, the handsomest room in the house, second floor front, with a beautiful flower garden in summer, directly under the side window. I would have given you the run of this house, reading-room and everything, and made you feel at home; if the lady is a musician, I would have bought a new piano; if you are fond of riding or driving, my stables should have been at your service. I have to pay men to exercise the horses, and it would be a favour to me to have you do some of it. Moreover, I have a carriage-house on the other side of my garden, which I do not use, and I would have fitted it up as a studio for you, with a

big north light and all conveniences. Then, again, if you would have liked to come here to spend your honeymoon, I would have vacated the place for a month, and let you have it all to yourselves.

"For the accommodations I should have offered you, I should have charged you no more than what your living would cost me. Certainly not over seven dollars a week each. For the rent of my studio, I should have asked you one landscape picture every year."

I was most cheerfully impressed by the project thus laid before me.

"My dear sir," I exclaimed, "you are generous, indeed. Will you make me the same offer if I bring some other lady here as my wife?"

"No, sir," cried the Major, striking his knee with his broad hand; "no, sir, I will not. I know all about Miss Welden, and I have formed a great fancy for her. I will run no risks with outside and unknown women."



"HE LOOKED OUT INTO THE NIGHT."

So saying, he rose abruptly to his feet, walked to a window, raised the shade, and looked out into the night. I remained gazing into the cheerful fire. The enthusiasm of this man had had a powerful effect upon me. I was actually thinking

what a delightful thing it would be to marry Miss Welden.

It was not the first time that this thought had come into my mind, but it had always been promptly expelled. As I told my host, I was not a marrying man, at least, I considered that my financial circumstances gave me no right to be one. But now the state of affairs seemed to be entirely changed; so far as pecuniary considerations were concerned, there was no reason why I should not be married to-morrow, and the perception of this fact set me in a glow. The Major now returned to the fire.

"Hello," he cried, "your face looks as if you were getting converted."

"It may be that I am," I said. "You are a powerful preacher."

He stepped quickly towards me, and clapped his hand upon my shoulder.

"Now," he said, "you are in the right road; don't hesitate; don't look to the right or the left; don't stop to consider; don't reason, but go straight ahead, and ask that young woman to be your wife. The fact that you are beginning to feel converted shows that you want her, and indeed I should have a very small opinion of you if you didn't want her. Ask her to-morrow morning; ask her here in this house before you go into that crowd of Dolliver's, where you will have no chance at all. I'll see to it that you have every chance here."

"Major," said I, rising, "I have the greatest mind in the world to do it. You have put before me opportunities which I did not suppose to exist; you have stirred up feelings in me that I thought were long ago conquered and quieted; you have——"

"Now, my dear boy," interrupted the Major, "don't say another word. Go to your room while you are in this mind, go to bed and go to sleep. Don't consider this or that, or any other thing. Keep your mind on the one fact that you are going to propose to Miss Welden in the morning. Above all, don't think about me. Don't imagine that perhaps I'm not going to suit your fancies. I will give you my word that if I don't suit, or can't make myself suit, I'll clear out. I'll take the risk of all that."

"Very good," said I, "I'll go to my room, for it is past country bed time, and I'll keep my mind on the subject you have brought up before me. But what of that Regent's punch you were going to brew?"

"Not a drop, sir, not a drop," exclaimed the Major. "When men want cheering up, and have nothing to do afterward, a

glass of punch on a winter night is a very good thing, but in a case like this we want clear heads. Anybody can determine to marry almost anybody if he drinks enough punch. When I set out to drive a pair of horses in a storm or on a cold, chilly night, I never touch a drop of spirits; no matter how much I feel that I need warming up at such times, I want to be sharpened, not comforted. But when I get safely home I mix myself a glass of something hot. Making up your mind at this time is much more important than driving any sort of horses in any kind of weather. The punch can wait until to-morrow, and if things turn out all right, I'll brew something out of the common, I assure you."

In my bedroom that night I gave no time to deliberation. Before I bade the Major good-night I had made up my mind to propose to Miss Welden.

I was downstairs before breakfast the next morning, and I met the Major just coming in from a visit to his stables.

"Merry Christmas," he cried, "and isn't this a glorious day—sun bright and sky clear? But the snow is about a foot deep on the level, and nobody knows how deep in the drifts. I have a Canadian in my employment who walks on snow shoes, and I have sent him across the country to the Dollivers to tell them where you are, and let them know that you will be there in the course of the afternoon. I'll send out some men with a double team of oxen and a snow plough, to break the road, and after luncheon I'll drive you over myself. In the meantime, how are you going to spend the morning, sir?"

I laughed as I gazed into his earnest countenance.

"I am going to try to break a road into the region of matrimony," I replied.

The Major's face shone like the morning sun.

"You're sound as a dollar!" he exclaimed. "After breakfast you two shall have this house to yourselves. I'll carry off Mrs. Bardsley and the rest of them to the Christmas-present business in the big barn. I suppose you can get through in an hour?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, "probably in less time."

The Major was now called off, and I strolled into the reading-room to look again at my picture. The room was full of the morning light, and as I turned to the wall on which my landscape hung, I stood

with eyes and mouth open—the paper on the wall was one designed by Clara Welden. I remembered when she was working on it in her studio. There was a tendril running through it which I had suggested. I clapped my hands, and felt like bursting out with a shout of pure enjoyment, but I restrained myself. The breakfast bell rang, and as I went out I closed the door behind me.

Miss Welden came down refreshed and lovely, and, as we exchanged Christmas salutations, I almost felt guilty in thinking of the conspiracy which we two men had hatched up against her, but I did not in the least swerve from my purpose.

It was about an hour afterward, when Miss Welden and I were sitting before a blazing fire in the parlour, that I declared my love for her, that I asked her to be my wife; and, in the ardour which increased as I spoke, I told her everything. I laid before her the whole glowing picture which Major Pendallas had painted for me.

When I began to speak, she looked at me in a quizzical way, as if she were amused at the sudden outcropping of my passion, but afterwards she began to listen with interest, as if it were due to me to give serious consideration to a matter which I urged so warmly, odd as it might be that I happened to be urging it just then. But when I told her what the Major had been talking about, her face flushed with indignation.

"It is a shame," she exclaimed, "that that man should discuss me in such a way! What right has he to meddle with my affairs, or give advice concerning me? If I can do it, I will leave this house this instant."

"You cannot do it," I said, "and I beg you will restrain your anger, until I explain the case. Major Pendallas takes a great interest in me on account of my work. You remember what he said at breakfast about my picture. He has taken——"

"I don't care anything about his interest in you," she interrupted. "I am thinking about myself. He has no right to take any interest in me—to discuss me. It is the most unwarrantable thing, the most——"

"Please do not say anything more against him," I implored. "I first want you to look at my picture. It is one of the few you have not seen."

"I don't want to see anything he owns," she said, sharply.

"But I beg of you to come and look at this, because I painted it. You may never have another chance, and I very much want you to see it."

She had a kind heart, and, angry as she was, she accompanied me to the reading-

room. As we stood before the picture, her eyes wandered away from it, and over the wall. Then she turned and looked at me, and I looked at her, but said nothing.

"Do you suppose," she asked presently, "that he knew I designed this paper?"

"I am positive he does not," I replied, "for if he had known it, he would certainly have mentioned it to me, and beside, it is almost impossible that he should



"IT IS A SHAME!" SHE EXCLAIMED.

know it."

"It is wonderful," she said, in a softer tone. "What do you make of it?"

"I make this," I replied. "The soul of that man is in sympathy with yours, and with mine. The things we do touch his

tastes and his sensibilities. He covers his wall with your paper, and he hangs my picture upon it. He does not know either of us, but his soul is in sympathy with us. I think you can hardly say that he has no right to take an interest in you."

She looked at me and smiled.

"That is all very pretty," she said, "but rather sentimental."

"Not a bit too much so," I exclaimed.

"Clara, I think you cannot any longer be angry with our host, and having set him aside, will you not consider me——"

"And consent to be a background to your work?" she asked. There was a bright sparkle in her eye, which made me feel justified in gently closing the door.

When Major Pendallas returned from the big barn, where, according to his custom, he had been making Christmas presents to all his people, he found Clara and me in the parlour. He approached us in a somewhat hesitating way, and as I looked around at him I could see an expression on his countenance which looked like a fear that he had come back before I had gotten through with the business of the morning, or perhaps before I had begun it. But as we both rose to meet him, I still holding Clara's hand, all doubt vanished from his handsome, honest, weatherbrowned face.

"I know it," he cried, as he looked from one to the other of us, "I know it. You needn't tell me anything," and he stretched out a hand to each of us. "This is a glorious Christmas," he said, "a glorious Christmas." It was plain he wanted to say a good deal, but could not find words, but Clara allowed no embarrassing silence.

"I have been very angry with you, Major," she said, with the kindest of smiles upon her still slightly flushed face. He looked at her inquiringly.

"It was because you were making all sorts of arrangements for me, without my knowing a word about them."

"Oh, that was because he didn't understand about the wall-paper," I said. "If he had known about that——"

"About what?" exclaimed Major Pendallas.

We two laughed, and then we took him into the reading-room. When all was explained to him he exclaimed——

"Upon my word!" and then, with his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his short coat, he turned about, and deliberately gazed upon the four walls of the room.

"Truly," he cried, "I can't take it in. To think that the two years I have been sitting in this room, surrounded by these warm, bright, delicate colours, these flowers of spring, these soft leaves, and these graceful spirals, this general impression of blossomy air, and then to think that you did it—I can't comprehend it. Why, I'll tell you, madam, when I went with my niece to a great city store, where they had thousands of patterns of wall-paper, I picked out this one in ten minutes; and, although there were a half-dozen others she fancied, I would have none but this for my reading-room. 'It is the flowers and air of spring,' I said, 'and I want to have it always around me.' I thought I liked you, madam, on account of what I had heard of you, and because of looking at you and listening to you; but that wasn't all—no, that wasn't all."

There was a moisture in Clara's eyes as she held out her hand to him.

"It is most marvellous and most charming," I said, "and I can see only one objection to the state of affairs—the picture should have been Clara's, and the background mine."

"Not a bit of it," exclaimed the Major. "The picture can be taken down, it can be stolen—lots of things can happen to it, and it occupies only a little space after all; but that beautiful wall is there, and it is here, and all around us; and here it will stay. It will last out my lifetime, and if any accidents happen to it I've got a lot more of it upstairs."

A servant now entered with a letter, which had been brought over from the Dollivers' by the man in snow-shoes. It was written to Clara, and she read it to us. Our friends were evidently overjoyed that we had not remained in the city, as they had supposed, and that we would soon be with them. They insisted that Major Pendallas should come over with us and spend the night. They had a large party of friends at the house, and were having a jolly time.

"Oh, I'll go," said the Major; "I intended to go, anyway; but as to jolly times, the times they are having there are no more to compare with what we are having here than an ashman's donkey is fit to run a three-mile heat with my colt Sapling. But we'll help to make them jolly. I'll take over the big silver punch bowl that I won four years ago, and have not used yet, for I have never had people

enough here to make it worth while. We'll christen the bowl on this happy day, and you, madam, shall have the first glass out of it. And now," continued the host, looking from the one to the other, "before we do any more, or say any more, or think of anything else, I want you to tell me this—are you two going to accept my proposition, and coming to live with me? I don't say anything about winter time, because that may be asking too much; but in the time of the year you would want to live in the country, anyway?"

"My dear Major," said Clara, "we have been talking about your proposition, and I don't see how we can help accepting it."

"Good," cried the Major, "good, better, best. I remarked before that this is a glorious Christmas, and I repeat the statement. Look you, the sun is beaming out of doors almost as brightly as we are beaming in here. There is a broad path cut to the stables, and I want to show you a sorrel mare with the most beautiful tail and mane you ever saw. I am going to have her put into training to carry a lady, and she is to be at your service, madam, whenever you want her; and as for you, sir, there are my stables. And if a beautiful country and fine horses help to make people happy, I think you will have no fault to find."

Early in the afternoon the Major drove us over to the Dollivers behind a pair of magnificent Cleveland bays. The grand action and spirit of the powerful animals, fired by the delight of being out of doors on this sparkling winter day, would have made Clara tremble, she said, under ordinary circumstances; but with the Major holding the reins she felt as safe as if she were dashing through the white caps with an old Cape Cod skipper at the tiller.

That was a grand old Christmas night at the Dolliver house. Our hostess, who was soon informed of what had happened in the morning, urged that our engagement should be made known, and when the punch-bowl was christened, and

the first cupful of the Major's wonderful brew was presented by him to Clara, there was an outburst of congratulation which deeply stirred the hearts of three of us.

"And now," said Major Pendallas, "let us drink the health of the blessed storm of Christmas eve, eighteen hundred and eighty."

And we drank it.



"A LETTER HAD BEEN BROUGHT BY A MAN IN SNOW-SHOES."